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Flying Squads & Self Defense Now

Jeff Shantz

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Fascist times are periods of open, brutal, class war (when the sheets quite literally slip off). Events of the last year, including the killing of three people opposing a white supremacist shouting racist and anti-Muslim slurs at two women on a mass transit train in Portland and the murder of IWW fellow worker Heather Heyer by a neo-Nazi in Charlottesville show the desperate need for working class self-defense of our communities.

In this we can draw on examples of rank-and-file self-defense organization. I would suggest, in particular, the rank-and-file flying squad provides an existing model for a rapid mobilization defense force for community protection.

I grew up in an autoworker family and in my family union, UAW (then CAW, now UNIFOR) Local 444, there was a very active and militant flying squad. It was deployed to defend workers and the community against a range of social threats, including, of course, during strikes, but also beyond. In Toronto, CAW flying squads were mobilized to defend immigrant and people facing deportation. Flying squads also defended unemployed workers

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and homeless people from attacks by police and rightist vigilantes during protests and demonstrations. A rank-and-file Canadian Union of Public Employees flying squad mobilized to defend Indigenous land protectors against racist mobs.

Flying Squads

The flying squad structure operates along the lines of affinity groups with which anarchists are so familiar and which many prefer. The structure allows members to know each other's strengths and weaknesses, preferences and discomforts. The active relationships of the flying squad reinforce accountability and commitment.

In Toronto, anarchists, some of whom were union members, formed an autonomous flying squad. The autonomous flying squad was organized typically to do strike support for workers on picket lines. Flying squad members could engage in activities, such as violating injunctions or strike protocols, that the striking workers did not feel they could do. The autonomous flying squad also mobilized for support of community groups during political actions.

In Vancouver, unionists have organized a self-defense unit, the Peacekeepers. They train together and organize to defend protesters against opponents including fascist groups such as the Soldiers of Odin. This is one model of mobile self-defense organizing that combines explicit self-defense with a flying squad structure for rapid mobilization and coordinated action.

In some cases flying squad members, as members of unions, can draw on additional established working class resources, such as legal support and defense funds for members who might need them based on their flying squad self-defense activities. These resources might not be available to more precarious or vulnerable people who might be targeted by fascists or police.

As self-defense practices spread, other groupings can take on some of these roles but the flying squad offers an already existing body of workers ready, willing and able to do some of the work of

self-defense. IWW branches could organize for this work, as Vancouver Wobblies are beginning to strategize around.

Conclusion

That anarchists and antifascists have been attacked with force at demonstrations (as in Vancouver and Seattle, where an antifascist syndicalist was shot) has made this a pressing concern. The murder of Heather Heyer brought home that these attacks on antifascists are not one-off events.

In Vancouver, unfortunately, in the absence of organized and effective self-defense formations, antifascists have had to rely on limited, and hierarchical, union marshals for defense at rallies. While this is fine up to a point and shows the necessity of flying squads, it means that the antifascists became dependent on groupings of which they are not integrally a part (even if their interests are the same and they work in solidarity).

In Vancouver, the IWW branch is making a possibly significant turn towards self-defense training and organizing to act as a defense squad for public mobilizations and potentially for community self-defense, but their numbers are small. A broader flying squad drawing on experiences and participation of already organized working class flying squads, could provide more extensive defense.